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AddressingHistory - An online community engagement tool

"There's nothing that makes you so aware of the improvisation of human existence as a song unfinished. Or an old address book." (Carson McCullers) ¹

Summary

The AddressingHistory project aims to develop a website that will allow users to place old Edinburgh addresses from historical Post Office Directories on to a map from the same era. The website will offer an engaging way to discover the history of the city through people, professions, addresses and maps. Every address that is added to the map will contribute to the work of local historians, genealogists, academic researchers and members of the general public who are interested in learning how the city and its people have changed since the late 18th century.

The AddressingHistory project is funded as part of the Developing Community Content strand of the JISC Digitisation and e-Content Programme and runs from April 2010 until September 2010. The aim of the project is to create an online engagement tool built using open standards that will enable members of the community, both within and out with academia (particularly local history groups and genealogists), to combine and enhance data from digitised historical Scottish Post Office Directories (PODs) with contemporaneous large-scale historical maps.

The development of the tool is led by the EDINA National Data Centre at the University of Edinburgh, exploiting substantial in-house experience with mapping, geo-parsing and geo-referencing data. Both digitised resources (maps and directories) are being provided, without restriction, by project partner the National Library of Scotland (NLS) who will also share extensive digital mapping and geo-coding expertise.

The historic PODs are rich and notable resources which offer a fine-grained spatial and temporal view on important social, economic and demographic circumstances. For Scotland there are at least 400 such directories, totalling over a quarter of a million pages and spanning the period 1783 – 1912. The NLS are in the process of scanning, OCRing and publishing this historic collection.

During the 6 month project period the AddressingHistory 'crowdsourcing' tool will focus on three volumes (1784-5; 1865; 1905-6) of the Edinburgh digitised PODs (held in XML format in a database structure) and mapping from the same periods however the specifications will be such as to accommodate the full Scottish collection as and when they become available. The Web 2.0 interface and back-end storage solutions used will therefore be scalable and as far as is practicable, self-standing so that multiple independent instances can be supported (both EDINA and NLS envisage having an instance of the interface which may be skinned to different audiences).

The Edinburgh Directories themselves are a unique and reliable collection of street, commercial, trades, law, court, parliamentary and postal information relating to the city of Edinburgh, which provide an excellent opportunity to discover and research the social and economic development of Scotland from the 18th century onwards. The directories are recognised as being of great importance in establishing and understanding commerce and trading patterns within Scotland during the previous centuries. They also provide a wealth of detailed information regarding residential names, occupations and addresses and are therefore an ideal source for genealogical study. The directories include maps of both Edinburgh and Leith indicating trade and residential origins and development.

¹ Collected Stories of Carson McCullers, The Sojourner p. 144, Mariner Books, 1998.

One significant deficiency of this collection which the AddressingHistory online tool will help redress by 'crowd sourcing', is that the addresses are not geo-referenced. Geo-referencing will enhance the collection by making possible explicit spatial search and discovery, for example, contemporary postcodes can be used as the entry point into the resource, translating a popular and contemporary search term into a list of historic street addresses. Furthermore, the addition of the geo-reference permits a map based metaphor to be used in the exploration and visualisation of the resource e.g. the historic distribution of shipwrights in Edinburgh can be plotted on a base map or the map itself can be used to explore the spatial distribution of selected phenomena (and their variation over time). Similarly, personalised maps illustrating family histories, maps tracking changes in local communities, and maps linking to other digitised materials such as census records and geo-referenced images, and historical addresses could all be captured through the online tool.

The second set of resources that the project will exploit are digitised maps. The NLS' Map Library is one of the ten largest in the world, with unrivalled collections; as the Library of the Faculty of Advocates from 1689, maps of Edinburgh were actively collected; as a Copyright Library, the collections are particularly strong in the printed mapping of Scotland. Since 1998, NLS Map Library has scanned over 20,000 historical maps of Scotland, including over 500 of Edinburgh and its environs (available for viewing as high-resolution colour images at <http://geo.nls.uk/maps/>). It is the pre existence of large scale geo-referenced maps against which the historic post office directories can be assessed and contextualised that allows the manual (geo)referencing down to individual house addresses to be accomplished. The availability of large scale historic maps (as far as possible being contemporary to the directory being geo-referenced), will allow users of the online tool to attach a location reference to a particular address by simply clicking on the map i.e. the map is the mechanism through which the geo-reference is allocated by the user to a particular Post Office directory entry.

The user interface to the tool and associated API will be intuitive and easy-to-use to encourage researchers, local history societies, genealogists and members of the wider community to discover, explore and contribute to rich records of social history and to create their own related maps and data sets for both academic and personal research. These are also being developed to be sympathetic to tools developed by related projects including Visualising Urban Geographies (VUG), an online resource developing new insights into the spatial character and historical development of Edinburgh (<http://geo.nls.uk/urbhist/>).

Crowd-sourcing this data in a tool built around Web 2.0 principles will, it is envisioned, eventually lead to a fully geo-coded version of the digitised directories. A key element in determining the success of the project will be public participation and collaboration. This will be encouraged and supported through extensive community outreach particularly via ongoing communication with a Project Advisory Board, Edinburgh Beltane – a national co-ordinating centre for public engagement, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences Knowledge Transfer Office as well as online through social media channels.

The AH project aims to have a beta version of the tool and API available by mid-summer for distribution to the project Advisory Board with a view to release to the wider community for further feedback and comment.

For further information visit: AddressingHistory Blog (<http://addressinghistory.blogs.edina.ac.uk>) or contact Stuart Macdonald (Project Manager) at stuart.macdonald@ed.ac.uk